

The Consular Agreement

The Consular Agreement with the Soviet Union, which the Senate narrowly ratified yesterday, will not by itself usher in a new era of warmer relations with the Soviet Union, anymore than it will usher in a swarm of Russian spies, as some of its opponents would have you believe. Nor, for that matter, should it be looked upon as a handsome gesture to the Soviets, for which they must now be expected to pay by delivering Hanoi to a Vietnam peace conference. Any such hopes or fears which may have been raised in the Senate debate ought quickly to be put to rest, lest illusions set in about the whole effort to ease off cold war tensions and push toward a greater measure of detente.

The first point about the treaty is that both the United States and Soviet Governments wanted it. There is little enough common interest between them to warrant upsetting agreements when they can be reached. To have blocked the consular pact would have reduced chances for more meaningful measures to improve relations which are still some distance down the road. Among them are the nonproliferation treaty, an expansion of East-West trade, and most urgent of all, an understanding of some sort on how far both countries are going to pursue a needless escalation of the nuclear arms race.

These, and further steps, are going to be taken only if the momentum is maintained, the atmosphere progressively improved. Even then, there is no certainty that the Soviets will be able to do much more than they have done to influence Hanoi toward a more conciliatory line. An expanded United States effort in Vietnam, and in particular an expanded bombing assault on industrial targets, may even oblige the Russians to step up their assistance to the forces with whom our troops are engaged. One can only hope that a steady trend toward more normal relations with Moscow will encourage the Russians, at the same time, to do more toward promoting some sort of solution in Vietnam. What one can be sure of, however, is that a deliberate effort to use the consular agreement or other detente-inducing measures as bait to make the Russians more cooperative would boomerang. That was the strategy advanced by those who sought to block the consular treaty, or amend it to death. In ratifying the treaty, the Senate has wisely put detente and Vietnam into the right relationship.

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